

Ranil as a leader in national politics

RANIL, the political magician, brought out Maithripala Sirisena after keeping citizens guessing for many months. No doubt behind-the-scenes deliberations must have taken place with CBK on the best strategy. This time the UNP Executive Committee was ‘unanimous’, a clear victory for the strategists behind the move to project Maithri as the common candidate.

Ranil chose peace in 2002 to end the ethnic conflict against the backdrop of an economy which had produced a sliding GDP for the first time in our history. Sri Lanka could not have pursued a war with a negative GDP, war risk insurance, the Katunayake Airport attack and the negative image of Sri Lanka overseas. Ranil never thought India would remain passive if he was to pursue a military option.

The UNP had learned lessons when ‘Operation Liberation’ was launched to capture Vadamaarachchi. Indian thinking however changed when the LTTE displayed its air power and started bombing Colombo. The acquisition of a fleet of light aircraft by the LTTE was the second strategic blunder, thus bringing India into anti-LTTE military operations directly.

Prabhakaran must have thought that he could accomplish his separatist ideology by launching aerial attacks on civilian targets, not knowing that it would have serious repercussions for the national security of India.

The first blunder was the coldblooded murder of the then Prime Minister of India, Shri Rajiv Gandhi. What a colossal error it was. Did he not consider the political ramifications of such a drastic decision?

Balasingham says Ranil a “cunning fox”

The late Dr. Anton Balasingham berated Ranil when he cast an international net over the LTTE and this was conveyed to the whole world when the LTTE boycotted the Tokyo Summit. Anton Balasingham was on



UNP Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe

record calling him a “cunning fox” whereas Wimal Weerawansa calls Ranil a “Don Juan Dharmapala” – two distinctly extreme views running counter to what Wimal Weerawansa was trying to say, nevertheless Ranil was proven to be a difficult character for the LTTE.

A close analysis of the entire peace process shows that it was an unpalatable exercise for the LTTE and it was waiting for the moment to escape it. This is the reason why the LTTE started loathing Ranil and persuaded the northern Tamils to vote against him. Is Ranil then a clever fox who outsmarted Prabhakaran? Did Prabhakaran see a net dangling over his head?

Prabhakaran was confident that he could achieve his objectives through military means. If Prabhakaran had been a pragmatist and given peace a chance, he would still be living. He was utterly mistaken.

Political parties too should undergo transformations to face new challenges. In one

way Ranil was a shrewd politician trying to secure a peace deal placing troops on a war path. The fault lies in the manner in which the peace process was sustained.

The Norwegians should have been extra careful in attending to LTTE demands. That was a grave mistake that should have been avoided. There were many sections of then Opposition (now in Government) claiming that they too should have been engaged in the peace process.

Ranil has proven himself to be an astute leader who was able to fire the first salvo at the LTTE through peace talks. The Karuna factor had a crippling effect on the LTTE, which resulted in it losing control over the entire Eastern Province. In military terms this was a devastating setback for the LTTE. The credit for

that must go to Ranil.

President Rajapaksa was able to garner support from India and was able to secure a

resounding victory over terrorism. That was Rajapaksa diplomacy at its peak. Indo-Lanka relations, of course, have changed dramatically during the post-victory political culture where ‘triumphalism’ is the norm not the much-needed reconciliation through a credible mechanism. Rajapaksa could have even vied for the Noble Peace Prize if he had mobi-

lised the entire nation toward genuine reconciliation as was demonstrated in South Africa. This would have entailed a constitutional amendment and the President had the numbers in Parliament to do so.

Guest Column



By Srinath Fernando

Now Tissa Attanayake has switched camps but it is only a propaganda victory for President Rajapaksa and does not have any impact on the electorate.

The United National Party (UNP) is the single largest political party in Sri Lanka and has had the good fortune of maintaining this position since it was formed in 1946. UNP founder D.S. Senanayake was at the forefront of securing independence for Ceylon. The ideals he cherished were carried forward by successive UNP leaders, right up to incumbent Ranil. The political landscape of Sri Lanka had a major shift soon after the historic war victory, party politics polarised and political strategies changed along with ground realities. This reality seems to have been felt by the UNP Executive Committee; otherwise the decision to support Maithripala could not possibly have been a cakewalk.

UNP and its multi ethnic diversity

Never in the history of the UNP has it ever played the racist card for narrow political gains. On the contrary it accommodates all shades of political opinion. It has deep-seated values in promoting harmony among all ethnic groups.

The UNP represents the entire gamut of cultural diversity in Sri Lanka. It must therefore secure its right position. It must guard against false propaganda and effectively counter adverse media coverage. It must challenge the State media as the Constitution has given equal opportunities for all individuals and organisations especially during election time.

The Constitutional right of the UNP as a leading political party must be upheld. The state media must be challenged through a democratic process and the UNP has all the legal luminaries in its camp. The absence of a strong Opposition would

pave the way for authoritarian tendencies and given the Constitutional powers and Parliamentary majority, any Government would exploit the situation to its advantage. It therefore behooves the UNP to assert its rightful place in society.

Ranil as a leader

Ranil does not fall prey to emotions as he knows full well that demonstrating emotions in politics would produce nothing and he patiently waited for the right opportunity. He does not believe in shortcuts to wealth by stealing public money and has demonstrated absolute honesty and probity throughout his political career. He stood for presidential elections; if he had such a history it would have surfaced at election time.

Never did we hear any corrupt deals of Ranil in his 40-year political career. This is a truly a remarkable feat as the majority of politicians are tainted by corrupt tales. One can conveniently call him ‘Mr. Clean’. Given the current election atmosphere, a leader with honest, educated and credible credentials is the most wanted man to take the country out of the abyss into which it has fallen.

Ranil does not believe in violence; if he did he would have stayed around the Presidential Secretariat until former President CBK relinquished two ministries forcibly taken over. Ranil was with the protesters and supporters but went home.

A man with violent motives would have stayed there to stir public sentiments and stormed the Bastille as there was a significant public opinion in favour of a putsch at that time. This would have ended in a bloodbath. He knew the outcome of such a decision.

Ranil never switched his loyalty to the UNP and remained a UNPer ever since he joined the party. He has twice been the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. No other member of the UNP is as experienced and qualified to hold the post of Leader of the UNP as he is. He should surely be the Prime Minister in the national unity government if the common candidate wins the election.

(This writer is a freelance journalist, a government affairs analyst and a registered member of the American Association of Political Consultants)

Blondes and “crossovers”

THERE is this blonde out for a walk. She comes to a river and sees another blonde on the opposite bank. “Yoo-hoo” she calls out, “How can I get to the other side?”

The second blonde looks up the river and then down the river and shouts back “You ARE on the other side”

To the confused public observing the endless cross-overs and cross-backs occurring in the political arena in the run-up to the presidential elections, it must be like chancing on a conference of blondes, in this very tropical country!

Choreography of the drama perfected

Whether they stand on this or the other side of the river seems to matter little to our politicians merrily changing parties. The choreography of the drama has been now perfected down to the auspicious minute for the jump.

In the opening scene, a few days before the main event, there are wild rumours of a cross over which is then strongly denied by the politician. Then suddenly the politician summons a media conference where he vehemently condemns the deviation from the accepted party line by his boss-

es and even alleges corruption among his former colleagues.

He is then warmly welcomed by the recipient party, the ceremony often concluding with religious rites. This is soon followed by a counter conference of the “other side” (or is it this side?) alleging betrayal.

And of course, they all have “files” on each other. Where we would normally have “information” on another person, a politician would claim to have a “file”, somewhat in the manner that an illiterate would refer to a document. But to the politician it befits men of public affairs to seem more formal, to refer only to information reduced to writing and preserved in neat files.

Besides, the image of a thick file, carefully maintained and safely hidden away, titillates the imagination of the public, long nurtured on a steady diet of thrills and spills of local tele-dramas.

Our politicians do not do things for selfish reasons. It is only us mere mortals who look for bargains; discounts and card holder dine free type deals that go to make ends meet. Going by the talk, their actions are motivated

by higher motives, selfless lives dedicated to freedom, human rights and honesty in public affairs.

No real difference between the two sides

It is now becoming increasingly obvious that there is no real difference between the two sides. Where Sri Lankan politicians are concerned “history” ended long before the Berlin Wall came down. The Rajapaksa regime may have vulgarised the meaning of public life with motorcades, bodyguards, all kinds of benefits (which are generally extended to the family too) used freely to keep them in.

But from long before the Rajapaksa phenomenon, a particular homogeneity has been evolving among those in politics in this country. When elected, a person becomes a kind of commodity whose loyalty is available, if offered the right price. There is no ideology, it is all personal. This is still more so among the top leaders who have only personal interests and motives; the party, the philosophy, the finer refinements and traditions of politics, only secondary considerations.

The theory of evolution and natural selection seem to have now asserted its immutability among our politicians too. Even in their appearance, demeanour and posture there is a remarkable sameness. A noticeable plumpness and a healthy glow of the skin distinguish them from the milling

crowd. But most of all, it is the god of good fortune who smiles on our politicians most benevolently. More they serve the public, the richer they become.

Politics in Sri Lanka

Francis Fukuyama argued that with the coming down of the Berlin Wall, which symbolised the end of the Soviet era, Western Liberal Democracy would become the overarching universal ideology for the foreseeable future. All political activity would take place within that larger framework.

That may be true for societies that Fukuyama looked at closely. But here in Sri Lanka history has been dead long before all that! In our political culture there are no ideologies, policies or even ideas. No loyalty to a person, party or even the truth is called for. Whoever is on top will call the shots and the rest will adhere as long as benefits follow from that arrangement. There is no difference whether you are on this side or the other.

It is now nearly 70 years since we gained independence. A good 30 years of that were wasted on a civil war, which was a creation of an earlier generation of politicians. At no time in this long period, whether before or after the war, have we reached the kind of growth rate that Asian Tiger economies sustained in their rise to prosperity.

On any economic statistic we are in the lower middle order,

on an unclear path, towards an uncertain future. In the policies we follow, there are only superficial similarities with those adopted by the Asian Tiger economies during their impressive rise.

In a warped and confused appreciation of the conditions that enabled those nations to achieve success, our leaders seem to applaud their weaknesses, the authoritarianism of Singapore, the clannishness of Malaysia, and the corruptions of South Korea.

While these nations are speedily addressing these weaknesses, we are adopting them! Having no clear idea, we only talk in terms of some basic symbols of development; two lane highways, harbours and budget airlines, features which became standard facilities quarter of a century back.

Our politicians smarter than they appear?

Perhaps our politicians are smarter than it appears. They certainly think so. It is therefore not inappropriate to end our essay with another example of blonde thinking.

A Russian, an American and a blonde were talking one day.

The Russian said: “We were the first in space.”

The American said: “We were the first on the moon.”

The blonde said: “So what? We are going to be the first on the sun!”

The Russian and the American

FT Quote

“It is now nearly 70 years since we gained independence. A good 30 years of that were wasted on a civil war, which was a creation of an earlier generation of politicians. At no time in this long period, whether before or after the war, have we reached the kind of growth rate that Asian Tiger economies sustained in their rise to prosperity. On any economic statistic we are in the lower middle order, on an unclear path, towards an uncertain future. In the policies we follow, there are only superficial similarities with those adopted by the Asian Tiger economies during their impressive rise. In a warped and confused appreciation of the conditions that enabled those nations to achieve success, our leaders seem to applaud their weaknesses, the authoritarianism of Singapore, the clannishness of Malaysia, and the corruptions of South Korea”

looked at each other and shook their heads.

“You cannot land on the sun, you idiot! You will burn up!”

To this, the blonde coolly answered: “We are not stupid, you know. We are going in the night!”

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